Screening job applicants

Ernest B. Akyeampong

Finding the right person for the job is the goal of every hiring decision. In most cases, a personal interview combined with a knowledge or skills test will be enough for both parties to see if they are compatible. However, for dangerous jobs or those where public safety or security is at stake, other screening practices may be involved. For example, a drug or alcohol test may be administered for airline pilots or truck drivers, a medical examination for firefighters or sports officiators, or a security check for positions that involve handling public money or maintaining information technology systems.

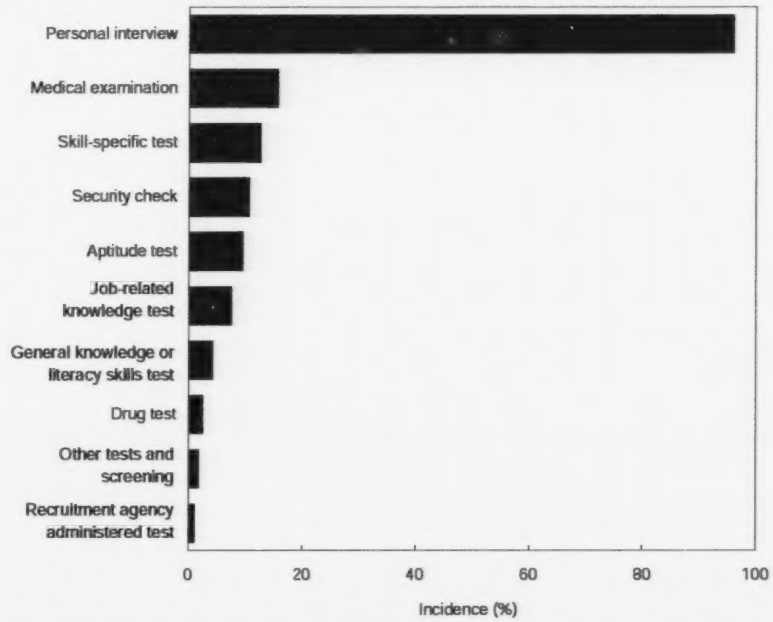
Despite general interest, very little is known statistically about the prevalence of some hiring practices. While information may be kept at the plant or firm level, it is not readily available to labour market researchers. Only recently have the first nationally comprehensive data become publicly available through Statistics Canada's Workplace and Employee Survey (WES) (see *Data source*). This article explores the prevalence and trends in the use of security checks, medical examinations, and drug tests in hiring, as well as variations by industry, occupation, workplace size, and selected worker characteristics.

An overview of hiring practices

The 11.7 million employees covered by WES in 2001 were asked what screening they had undergone when first hired by their employer. Surprisingly, about 1 in 5 reported none. These 2.6 million employees are excluded in this article (see *A closer look at non-screened employees*).

Of the remaining 9.1 million respondents, who reported at least one form of screening, almost all (95.8%) underwent a personal interview prior to hiring (Chart A). Next in the ranking were medical examinations (15.5%), followed by skill-specific tests (12.4%) and security checks (10.4%). Drug tests (2.2%) placed eighth.

Chart A Virtually every new employee who underwent screening had a personal interview.



Source: Workplace and Employee Survey, 2001

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Data source

The **Workplace and Employee Survey** (WES) began in 1999 as a joint program of Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada. This longitudinal survey examines how employers and their employees respond to the changing competitive and technological environment. WES provides insight into the relationship between a firm's employment practices and its performance, as well as in-depth information on the effects of technology, training, and human resources practices. The survey is unique in that employers and employees are linked. Employees are selected from the sampled workplaces, making information from both available in a single framework.

The 2001 sample consisted of 6,200 establishments and 20,400 employees. Public administration, agriculture, fishing and trapping, and private households are excluded from WES. Public administration would undoubtedly have greatly raised the overall rate of security checks as a hiring tool.

Following extensive consultation with employers, union leaders, and human resource practitioners in the early 1990s, a list of 10 screening practices was selected. It is therefore possible that some past and more recent practices may have been missed.

To examine changes over time, employees in 2001 were divided according to when they were hired by their current employer: prior to the 1980s (382,000), during the 1980s (1,100,000), during the 1990s (4,664,000), or in 2000 or 2001 (2,959,000).

A closer look at non-screened employees

At first it is puzzling that almost a quarter of employees did not go through any of the 10 identified screening practices—not even a personal interview—when first hired. How different were they from the other 9.1 million who underwent at least one form of screening?

The data reveal virtually no differences between the two groups in terms of demographics (sex or age), industry or occupation. The one significant difference was that the non-screened were twice as likely to be found in small workplaces (under 20 employees)—about 50% compared with only 25% of those who were screened. Presumably, small firms find screening costs prohibitive and therefore avoid using them. As well, nearly half of the non-screened workers had heard of the job opening from a family member or friend, and another 16% had been contacted directly by the employer. Also, many may have considered their personal interview to be informal and as such not worthy of being characterized as a screening process. Finally, there is the issue of recall. Many respondents may simply have forgotten undergoing any of the processes.

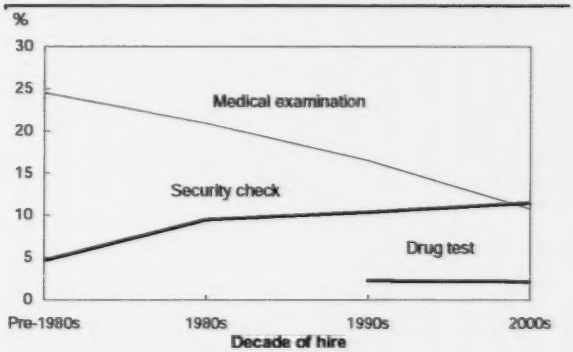
Trends in security, medical and drug screening

Screening practices have changed over the years for a number of reasons. These include changes in the industry and occupation job mix; improvements in detecting health conditions and drug or alcohol abuse; and increased access to personal, financial, criminal, and other records. Changes in cultural norms may also have played a role. For example, more and better checking for drug use, especially among athletes, may be having its effects on the job world. Similarly, growing public awareness regarding abuse of women, the disabled, and especially children may have increased the need to scrutinize potential workers in direct contact with these and other groups.

Job evolution over the past several decades appears to have been mirrored in the screening practices used by employers. For example, in line with the decline in manufacturing and other physically demanding jobs, the use of medical examinations has fallen (Chart B). Also, with improved and safer machinery, certain jobs in manufacturing, construction and other primary industries no longer require the same physical demands, further reducing the need for medical examinations. Some 11% of the most recent hires were given a medical exam compared with about 25% of new hires prior to 1980.

In contrast, the growth in information technology jobs, which are relatively more susceptible to costly security breaches, has been accompanied by a steady rise in

Chart B Medical examinations have declined, but security checks have increased.



Source: Workplace and Employee Survey

security checks. Some 12% of the most recent hires underwent a security check compared with only 5% of pre-1980 new hires.

The use of drug tests, a rarity for workers hired prior to the 1990s, is inching up for some positions. This is due in large part to advancements in testing techniques as well as growing acceptance of the practice. Roughly 1 in 50 new hires in the 1990s and the 2000s were given this type of screening.

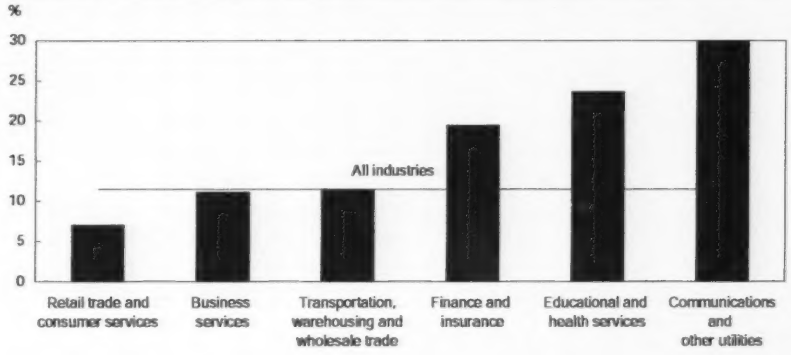
Screening test incidence varies by job type

The likelihood of undergoing a medical exam, security check or drug test depends on many factors, principally industry and occupation as well as workplace size. (Job types with small sample sizes, and therefore high sampling variability, were omitted from this comparison.) Variations by sex and age are also briefly examined. Comparisons are based on the most recent hires: the three million workers initially hired in 2000 and 2001. The choice was made for several reasons. First, this group was least likely to have problems with recall. Second, their occupation, industry or workplace size was unlikely to have changed. Third, the large sample size of this cohort permits statistically meaningful comparisons to be made. Last, the hiring screening practices used for this cohort are the most currently relevant.

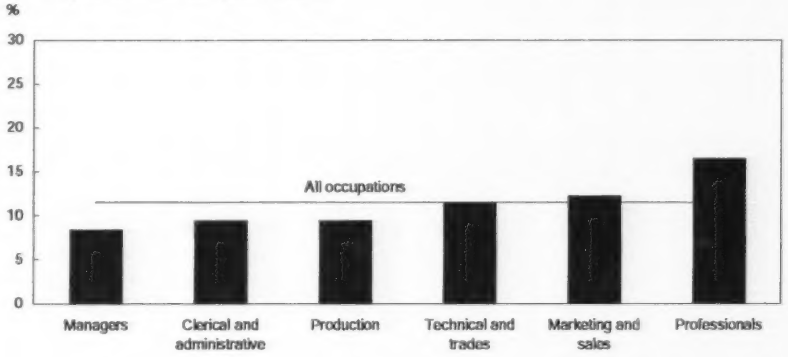
Security checks

Security checks were most common for those seeking professional jobs, notably teachers and health workers. Law enforcement officers and information technology personnel also fall into this group. About 16% of people hired into

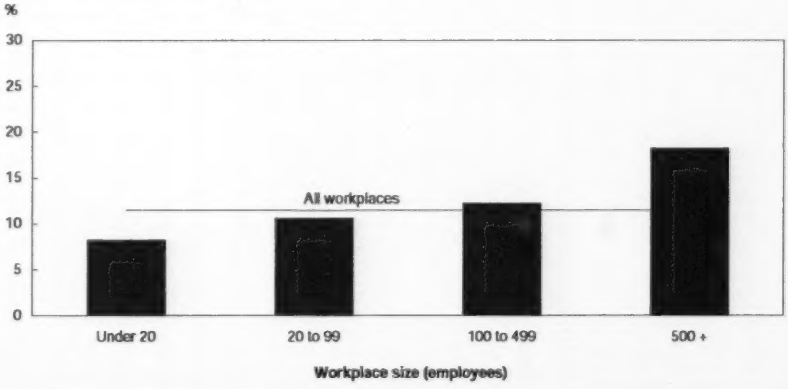
Chart C Among those hired in 2000 and 2001, security checks were most common in communications and utilities...



... for professional positions

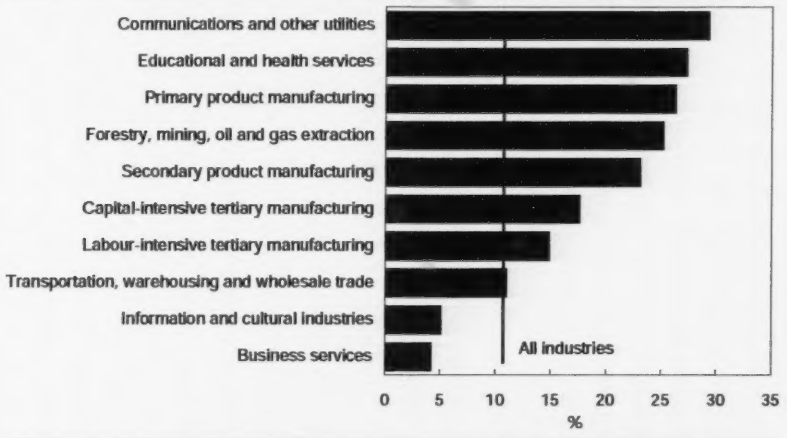


... and in large workplaces



Source: Workplace and Employee Survey, 2001

Chart D Medical examinations were most common in communications, and education and health.



Source: Workplace and Employee Survey, 2001

Medical examinations

By industry, medical examinations were most common in communications and other utilities (29%), education and health (27%), and primary and secondary manufacturing (about 25% each) (Chart D). The financial and other disruptive consequences associated with illness-related absences in some of these industries can be quite substantial. Medical exams were least common in business services (4%).

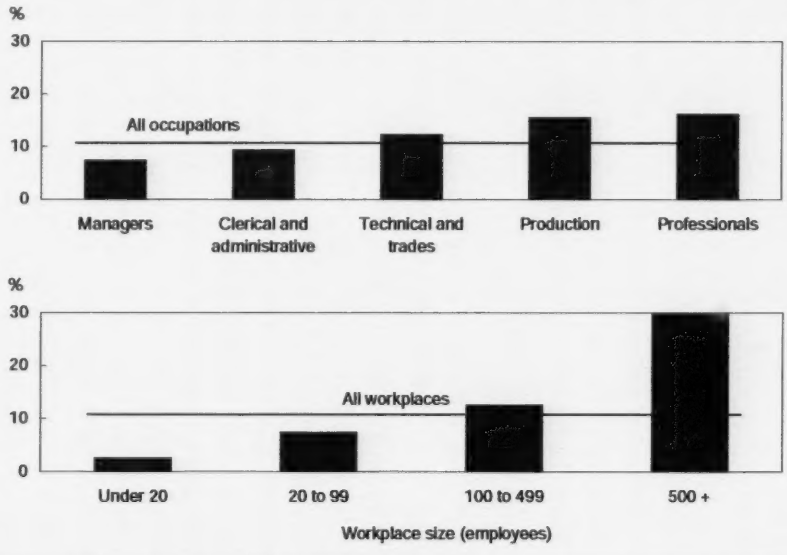
Medical examinations were most common for professional occupations (including teachers and health workers, 16%) (Chart E). Slightly higher than average rates were also seen for more physically demanding production, technical and trades jobs.

such positions in 2000 and 2001 underwent security screening (Chart C). A slightly higher than average proportion of persons hired into marketing and sales positions (12%) also went through the process. Those hired into managerial (8%), and clerical/administrative and production jobs (9%) were least often subjected to a security check.

Among the major industries, use was highest in communications and other utilities (30%), education and health (24%), and finance and insurance (19%). It was lowest in retail trade and consumer services (7%).

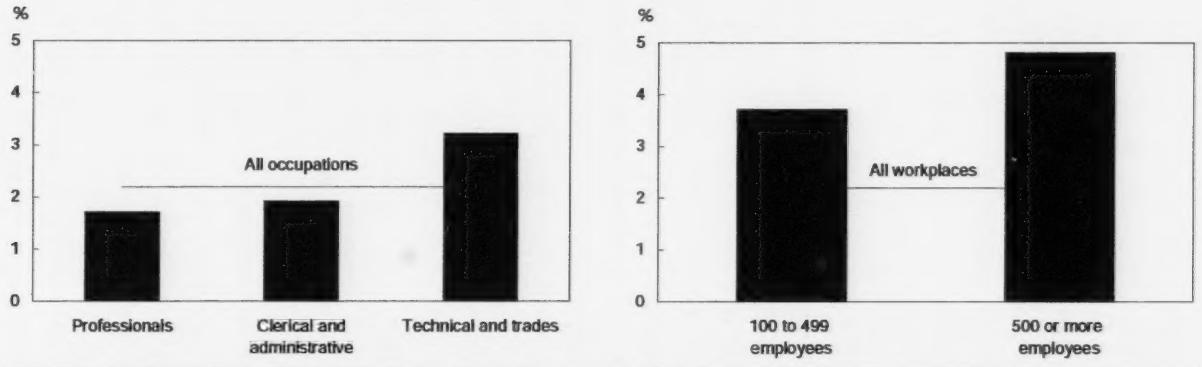
Security screening also increased with workplace size. The largest workplaces (500 or more employees), who were likely best able to afford the practice, screened 18% of their new hires in 2000 and 2001. The rate for small workplaces (less than 20) was just 8%.

Chart E Seekers of professional, production, and technical and trades jobs, as well as jobs in large firms, were more likely to undergo a medical exam.



Source: Workplace and Employee Survey, 2001

Chart F Drug tests were most common for technical and trades jobs... ...and jobs in large workplaces.



Source: Workplace and Employee Survey, 2001

Use also increased with workplace size, the process being used for 30% of new hires in large workplaces (likely more able to finance them), as opposed to only 2% in small workplaces.

Drug tests

Compared with security checks (11.5%) and medical exams (10.8%), the use of drug tests for 2000 and 2001 new hires was minimal (just 2.2%) (Chart F). However, a higher than average number were carried out in primary product manufacturing industries (9.0%), for technical and trades positions (3.2%), and in large workplaces (3.7% in those with 100 to 499 employees, 4.8% in those with 500 or more).

Differences by sex and age

No significant differences were seen in the use of the three screening practices by sex or age, with a few notable exceptions. Young new hires (15 to 24, and more likely to be hired into part-time or less sensitive positions) were given either a security check or a medical examination less often than the average. New hires aged 45 to 54 were relatively more likely to have to take a medical examination, while those aged 25 to 44 were more likely to be given a drug test.

Multiple screening tests not common

The chances of a person undergoing more than one of the three non-knowledge-based screening tests was very low. Of the three million new hires in 2000 and 2001, just under 1% (27,000) underwent all three tests. Approximately 4% (107,000) were given two tests, with medical and security, the most popular combination, being a requirement for 75,000 of them. Persons hired into professional occupations (for example, teachers, health workers) and communications and other utilities industries were most likely to be given these two tests.

Conclusion

Personal interviews and job-related skill or knowledge tests are routine in many hirings. But other practices such as medical examinations, security checks and, lately, drug tests are also frequently required in specific situations.

Over the years, the use of medical examinations as a screening tool has become less prevalent, while security checks have risen steadily. Pre-1980 new hires were five times more likely to undergo a medical examination than a security check (the rates were 25% and 5% respectively). In contrast, new hires in 2000 and 2001 were slightly more likely to undergo a security check (12%) than a medical examination (11%).

Medical examinations continue to feature prominently for the more physically demanding jobs, such as those found in primary and secondary product manufacturing. Medical exams as well as security

checks are especially common today for persons hired into professional jobs (such as teaching and health), law enforcement, and the telecommunications area. It is also safe to assume that in the post 9/11 environment, the use of security checks to screen new hires will likely increase.

Drug tests, rarely used for screening before 1990, are now required for roughly 1 in 50 employees being hired. Continuing improvements in drug screening technology will likely lead to further growth of this tool in the future.